THE WAGER
September 16, 2007

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Psalm 14
Luke 15:1–10

"Fools say in their heart,
'There is no God.'"
Psalm 14:1 (NRSV)

The overwhelming impression I had after looking at the new images generated from the Hubble telescope was one of awe and wonder and the feeling that we are not alone. . . . The more we look at this evidence of the basic structure of the universe, the more it appears to scientists and others that there is indeed some hand that guided us into existence. . . . I am still awed by the images from deep space; there is a sense of majesty that is profound, almost beyond comprehension. I sense the presence of God, but it is in the details that I find more comprehensible information about the nature of God.

Michael Reagan
Reflections on the Nature of God

A professor of church history at Yale Divinity School invited an Orthodox priest to lecture to his class on the topic of the great creeds of the church. Michael Lindvall tells the story in his new book, *A Geography of God*. The lecture was pretty dry, and at the end, a student asked a kind of typical graduate student question:

> "Father Theodore, what can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the creed?" The priest looked confused. "Well, you just say it. It's not that hard to master. With a little effort most can learn it by heart."
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> "No, you don't understand," continued the student. "What am I to do when I have difficulty affirming parts of the creed — like the virgin birth?" The priest still looked confused. "You just say it. It will come to you eventually."

> Now frustrated and impatient, the student tried again: "How can I with integrity affirm a creed in which I do not believe?"
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> "How old are you?" asked the priest. "Twenty-three? Don't be so hard on yourself. There are lots of things that you don't know at twenty-three. Eventually, it may come to you." (*A Geography of God*, p. 18)

I couldn't help but think about one of my favorite people, Hoffman Erb, a distinguished professor of agronomy at Ohio State University and a devoted member of the congregation I was serving. Hoff and Mary Jane were there every Sunday, volunteered regularly in our food pantry, were progressive socially and expected their church to be. Hoff was such a good man—bright, generous, kind—but when it came time in the Sunday service to stand up and say the Apostles' Creed, Hoff did something peculiar: he edited out certain phrases as he went along. Ministers can see this sort of thing. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," Hoff said with the congregation. "And in Jesus Christ . . ." When it came to "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary," Hoff stopped affirming. He jumped back in for "crucified, dead, and buried" and jumped back out for "on the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven." Back in for the Holy Spirit, holy catholic church, in for "the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins," back out for "the resurrection of the body."

It was pretty clear what he was doing: a lifelong academic, an intellectual, a scientist, Hoff wasn't about to affirm belief in something he did not know, in an objective sense, to be true. I tried all the standard arguments: It's the church's creed, not ours. When we say it, we're simply standing in a long line of people of all sorts of belief and unbelief who nevertheless wanted to identify themselves with the Church of Jesus Christ. I explained that we recite the creed corporately precisely because not everybody believes everything every moment and when we recite it together we are sort of carrying one another along. Still, one of my precious memories is of Hoff, standing with the congregation during the Creed, resolutely refusing to say what he did not know for sure to be true.

It's actually an issue that is several centuries old. In the period of history we know as the Enlightenment, the West, at least, started to define Truth by what human reason could understand to be true and not what religion, revelation, the church, said was true. Enlightenment thinkers said simply, if you want me to believe it, prove it; show me the evidence. Conflict followed. Copernicus arranged for his studies of the solar system to be published posthumously because they conflicted with what the church knew to be the truth. Galileo was hounded, subpoenaed, forced to recant, and placed under house arrest for observing that the sun was the center of the solar system, not the earth, as the church knew to be true. Thomas Jefferson, a true Enlightenment thinker, spent one long evening with a copy of the New

Testament and a razor blade, cutting out all the parts he didn't like and that conflicted with reason.

Enlightenment thinking liberated the human intellect, gave birth to free scientific inquiry, elevated human reason over revelation, recast and shaped modern Western culture. Religion, for many Enlightenment thinkers, was relegated to superstition, ignorance, wishful thinking.

There are currently several best sellers arguing the same positions but with the added edge that religion, in our time, has been seen to be potentially toxic, dangerous. Peter Gomes tells about tracking down a former Harvard student living in Manhattan, a serious, thoughtful member of Harvard's Memorial Church. Gomes asked if he had found a church, and the young man said he'd given up on religion. He had seen the devastation of 9/11 too closely and now regarded religion "not simply as inadequate to the needs of modern life, but as a positive danger to it."

He told Gomes that he had been reading one of the best sellers I referred to, Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*. Harris says, "Words like 'God' and 'Allah' must go the way of 'Apollo' and 'Baal,' or they will unmake our world."

Harris points out that alchemy fascinated human beings for 1,000 years before disappearing. "Faith-based religion must suffer the same slide into obsolescence" (see *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, pp. 231–233).

That's exactly what Enlightenment thinkers predicted would happen—Auguste Comte, Max Weber, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud: "whenever modernity advances, religion fades."

Another best-selling author, Richard Dawkins, argues, in *The God Delusion,* that the world would be a far better place if religion were hastened to extinction. And in light of the events we remembered last Tuesday—hijacked jetliners crashing into the World Trade Center towers, at least in part in the name of radical, militant Islam—many would agree.

One reviewer of Dawkins' book gently asks if the author has forgotten that the Soviet Union was an intentionally godless state and culture? Have Dawkins and others forgotten the atrocities Josef Stalin afflicted in the name of secularism? Hitler, Mao Tse-Tung, Pol Pot presided over mass murder of millions of people in the name of a new godless, religionless secularism.

In the meantime, religion has not faded; human spirituality had not disappeared. Contrary to Harris's and Dawkins'—and before them Marx's, Freud's and Nietzsche's—confident obituary, the scholars are now calling the whole business "The Secularization Myth."

Books about God and religion continue to fill the shelves of Borders, Barnes and Noble, and Amazon.com; politicians continue to employ and exploit religion. Rreligion and God simply refuse to go away. In the *New York Times* magazine cover story, three weeks ago, "The Great Separation," Mark Lilla wrote, "We in the West find it incomprehensible that theological ideas still inflame the minds of men . . . stirring up passions that can leave societies in ruins. We had assumed that this was no longer possible—that human beings had learned to separate religious questions from political ones. We were wrong. It's we who are the fragile exception."

Sociologist Peter Berger quipped that "if India is the world's most religious country and Sweden the least, then the United States is a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes."

Or at least by people who are utterly insensitive and tone-deaf to the reality and power of religion, who can blithely characterize our invasion and occupation of a Muslim nation that has lost 75,000 innocent civilians as a result of our invasion as "Kicking Ass in Iraq."

Can you imagine how that sounds in the mosques of Baghdad and Kabul—and all over the Muslim world?

We need to pay more, not less, attention to God and religion, not for sectarian reasons, but for reasons of peace.

Of course there's an Islam that is intolerant, exclusive, and violent. And so, frankly, there's a Judaism and Christianity that is intolerant and exclusive and violent—not just in the past. A news report recently described an Evangelical Christian care package the Pentagon was about to pass along to American troops in Iraq that contained a video game, "Left Behind: Eternal Forces," based on the Left Behind series of best sellers, which purports to teach Christian values while allowing players to kill in the name of Christianity (*The Charlotte Observer*, 18 August 2007).

So we have work to do, those of us who believe in God and know the potential of religion—not just for destruction and violence, but for reconciliation and peace. We—all of us, Christians, Jews, Muslims—should work harder at differentiating our mainstream from our radical and violent extremes.

The truth is that Islamic and Jewish and Christian scripture and tradition have both an exclusive and inclusive dimension. Each can quote from their exclusive tradition to perpetuate violence and killing of the other. But each can choose to quote from the inclusive tradition that teaches acceptance, reconciliation, and peace.

We Christians need to say no to talk about a clash of civilizations, no to the whole exclusivist and violent Left Behind business, no to Franklin Graham's and Pat Robertson's racist characterization of Islam and Mohammed, no to the late James Kennedy's declaration that "God gave us a Christian nation and we need to do whatever is necessary to keep it that way." How is that different from what Islamists are saying?

Is it possible? Is there common ground? Is there a global consciousness that is more than political correctness; a global, inclusive consciousness that has theological and biblical integrity?

I choose to say yes. It's there in scripture—in the universal scope of Hebrew scripture in which all nations, all people, presumably carrying their sacred traditions, their scripture, their religion with them—become part of the global economy and politics of God: Egyptians, Assyrians (that is, Iraqis), Babylonians, Persians (that is, Iranians), Jews.

That's how the prophet Isaiah chooses to see the future. Listen to this amazing proposal, from the nineteenth chapter:

> On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrians will come into Egypt and the Egyptians into Assyria and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. On that day Israel will be a third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage." (Isaiah 19:23–24)

That's worth knowing and talking about and proclaiming and arguing and praying for—a global vision, an inclusive vision, a peaceful vision of the one God's dream and will for the creation.

"Fools say in their heart, 'There is no God,'" the psalmist observed. What's going on here, the scholars tell us, is not an attack on atheism, intellectual disbelief. The terrain here is the heart, not the head. The Bible nowhere argues for the existence of God. It does contain a lot of material describing human beings in relationship to God, conversing, arguing, negotiating, pleading, complaining, thanking, praising, praying.

In the Bible, the God question belongs in the heart at least as much as the intellect. In the Bible, faith in God means trusting God more than believing ideas about God to be true. In the Bible, people trust and follow and obey God, even as they're struggling with belief.

It is a matter of the heart and the will. It is a matter of a decision each of us is invited to make to trust God, to live before God, to love as a child of God in a world God dearly loves.

There are no proofs here. Trust always involves risk. “The Wager” is what the philosopher Pascal called it. Søren Kierkegaard said it is a “leap of faith.”

We leap, wager, choose—and why? Probably not because of compelling rational arguments.

Rather, for Christians, we choose because we are haunted by the story of a man who, in his life, showed us what God is like. We wager because we are haunted and compelled by what that man showed us: that God is not an abstract philosophic proposition but, remarkably, like a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness in order to hunt down and find and bring safely home the one who is lost.

We wager because of the startling notion that man taught, that the one God of creation, the God of all people, is like a woman who overturns her house to find one lost coin.

Of all the intellectual arguments and artistic portrayals, I wager, because of two:

> the highway builder, making a way where there is no way, bringing together antagonists and mortal enemies, his precious children, Egyptians, Assyrians, Jews
>
> and that shepherd, with a lost sheep on his shoulders, coming home

And when I despair about the hope for peace and reconciliation, I remember God the Highway Builder and God the Good Shepherd, who will not abandon a lost sheep, not ever, but will go in search of it until he finds it and puts it gently on his shoulder and carries it home.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has called his new book on basic Christian beliefs *Tokens of Trust*. I love the way he put it:

> We don’t get to know what God is like in the abstract. We don’t get a definition. We get a life that shows us what God wants to happen.

And then this:

> God is to be trusted as we would trust a loving parent, whose commitment to us is inexhaustible, whose purposes are unfailingly

> generous, someone whose life is the source of our life, and who guarantees that there is always a home for us." (*Tokens of Trust*, pp. 9, 16, 19)

So if you are living somewhere between hope and despair for the human condition and if your intellectual struggles with belief are ending up in a series of blind alleys, I invite you to ponder the Highway Builder, the Good Shepherd who will never abandon his sheep. You, I, all of us are invited to the leap of faith, the wager, to trust God, to live in God's love, to strive to follow—all the days of your life, to bet your life on.

God of the sparrow, God of the whale . . .
God of the loving heart
How do your children say Joy
How do your children say Home